

# ***Toward A Sustainable Future***

Cambridge Growth Policy

UPDATE 2007

## **URBAN DESIGN**







# Urban Design

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## Design Review

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In 1993, project review was only required in certain districts for which extensive planning had been done, such as the East Cambridge Riverfront and Harvard Square. However, it was clearly desirable to extend the geographic scope of review requirements, both to establish a more equitable system in which similar proposals would be treated similarly, as well as to give the community information and an opportunity to comment on upcoming projects. This goal, expressed in Policy 57, was accomplished in the Citywide Rezoning adopted in 2001, which created citywide project review in Article 19 of the Zoning Ordinance. This project review was supplemented by the Eastern Cambridge Rezoning petition, which gave further guidance for reviewing projects in the city's most active development area. Larger projects are required to undergo traffic and urban design review at the Planning Board, while smaller buildings go through a development consultation process at the staff level.

Between 1993 and 2001, projects continued to be designed in development areas where design review had long been required, such as the East Cambridge Riverfront. Following a different model, University Park had a unique zoning framework, which generally allowed projects to proceed without a special permit if they met the criteria in the Agreement for Design Review, and if they were reviewed by the Planning Board. University Park is now complete, with 2.3 million square feet of development, including 674 housing units with at least 150 affordable units, 100,000 square feet of open space, several research and development buildings, a



*The Harvard Square Post Office is one of the more recent "infill" buildings built under the provisions of the Harvard Square Overlay District. The design review process helped the project fit into its historical setting.*



### POLICY 57

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Design review for new development should be established throughout the city for all areas where future development will be of a scale or quantity that will potentially change or establish the character of the district.

### POLICY 58

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Even in areas where the character of a district is firmly established and new development is likely to be very modest, design review should be required where small scale changes are likely to disrupt the desired district character.

### POLICY 59

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The regulations for all zoning districts in Cambridge should reflect the city's fundamental urban design and environmental objectives: height, setback, use, site development, and density standards imposed should be consistent with or advance those urban design objectives.





*East Cambridge Riverfront, c. 1978. The City rezoned the area, created an urban design plan, and began to put together public and private funding to begin redevelopment.*



*East Cambridge Riverfront, 1991. The redevelopment process resulted in 10 acres of new parkland, including Lechmere Canal Park at the center. A dozen different projects were approved by the Planning Board, for housing, office, hotel, and retail uses. (Photo: Landslides)*



hotel, a supermarket, a day care facility, and some ground floor retail. This project fully implemented the urban design vision first committed to paper in 1983, and has received national acclaim as a model for how to transform a former industrial area into a vital mixed-use center.

In Harvard Square, several buildings on “infill” sites went through the Harvard Square Advisory Committee and Planning Board design review process specified in the Harvard Square Overlay District; these include the Omni Travel Building and One Bow Street in the Quincy Square area, and the more recent modernist glass building at 90 Mt. Auburn Street. An important change affecting design review in the square was the establishment, in 2000, of the Harvard Square Conservation District, administered by the Cambridge Historical Commission. This is the first conservation district in a commercial area, and it gives the Commission wide review authority for building exteriors, supplementing the preexisting review processes.

The Central Square Overlay District mandates design review for larger projects there; the most noteworthy one in the last decade was the Holmes project at the main intersection in the square. Here, an undistinguished group of smaller buildings was replaced by a six story mixed-use project, with ground floor retail, some office, and residences on the upper floors. More recently, two multifamily residential projects have been approved following careful review by the community, City staff, and the Planning Board, on sites just off Massachusetts Avenue. One will be on a parking lot and the other is now under construction at the site of a former night club.

## Urban Design Standards

At the time of the growth policy initiative, there were no height limits in the Residence C3, Industry B, and Office 3 zoning districts, but the community felt that there should be reasonable limits on how high buildings would be allowed to be built. Thus, the growth policy document called for the establishment of a height cap. Subsequently, a citywide maximum height limit of 120 feet was adopted in 1997. Also, the document pointed out the undesirability of the open space bonus,



*The project at 90 Mt. Auburn was designed to assert its modernity while respecting its historical neighbors.*



*One of the best ways to treat rooftop mechanical equipment is to make it part of the architecture.*





*Cambridgeport Revitalization Area, c. 1980. The University Park site is in the foreground, with Pacific Street and the lower Cambridgeport industrial area toward the river, and with Brookline Street and the Cambridgeport neighborhood to the right in the picture.*



*Cambridgeport Revitalization Area, 2004. University Park site is near completion in the foreground, with housing along the Brookline Street neighborhood edge on the right, the Common in the center, and the highest buildings to the left, close to the MIT campus. (Photo courtesy of Forest City Enterprises)*

which had allowed greater density on sites next to open space and wide streets, a strategy that was perhaps more understandable in the sixties, when the community was economically depressed and eager for unfettered new development. The bonus was eliminated in 1997.

The Article 19 urban design guidelines directly relate to the suggestions made in *Toward a Sustainable Future* (see Policies 60, 61, and 62). Projects applying for a special permit are judged as to their compliance with the following criteria:

- Responds to existing or anticipated pattern of development
- Is pedestrian and bicycle-friendly
- Mitigates adverse environmental impacts upon its neighbors
- Does not overburden City infrastructure
- Reinforces and enhances complex urban aspects of Cambridge
- Expands housing supply, and
- Enhances and expands open space amenities.

Standards have also been developed for the design of rooftop mechanical equipment, a subject that occupied a committee for a year of deliberation. The basic idea is that such equipment needs to be taken into account early in the building design, rather than left to late in the design process, when it becomes more difficult to harmonize with the rest of the building.

The City is also promoting green design, and requires that projects subject to review show how the building rates according to the nationally promulgated LEED standards. At this point, project proponents are asked to consider the very useful checklist of environmental standards and to explain how the design would rate in that system of measurement.

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#### POLICY 60

Urban design and environmental standards should be developed for all areas of the city which are or may be in the future subject to redevelopment or significant new development.

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#### POLICY 61

Urban design standards should reflect the historic context within which change will occur while permitting design that is responsive to contemporary circumstances.

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#### POLICY 62

As transitions between differing uses are extremely important in a densely developed city, urban design standards should be developed to ensure that these transitions are made properly, respecting to the maximum extent possible the needs of each contrasting use.

